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ABSTRACT

This abstract summarizes recent statistics on the prevalence and causes of disability among U.S. children, based on data from the 1992 National Health Interview Survey, a household survey of the noninstitutionalized U.S. population. Analysis indicates that there are difficulties in comparing disability prevalence across age groups; overall, 5.5 percent of children (ages 5-17) have disabilities related to schooling, of whom 58 percent attend special schools or classes; diseases of the respiratory system constitute the most common group of disabling conditions; and children from poor families attend special schools and classes at nearly twice the rate of those who are not poor. Four tables present detailed data on: (1) number and percent of children with disabilities, by degree of limitation and age; (2) number and percent of children with school-related disabilities, by degree of limitation and gender; (3) number and percent of children needing and receiving special education by race, ethnicity, and poverty status; and (4) health conditions and impairments causing disability in children by broad condition category. (DB)

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Disability Statistics Abstract

Number 15

Disabilities Among Children

Barbara L. Wenger, H. Stephen Kaye, and Mitchell P. LaPlante

An estimated 4.0 million children and adolescents, or 6.1 percent of the U.S. population under 18 years of age, have disabilities. Here, disability is defined broadly to include any limitation in activity due to a chronic health condition or impairment. Among children under age 5, 2.0 percent are limited in play activities, with an additional 0.8 percent limited in some other way. Among school-age children (5–17), 5.5 percent have school-related disabilities (including 3.2 percent who attend special schools or classes) and an additional 2.0 percent are limited in non-school activities.

This abstract summarizes recent statistics on the prevalence and causes of disability among American children. Data come from an analysis of the 1992 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), a household survey of the non-institutionalized U.S. population, conducted by the Census Bureau for the National Center for Health Statistics. Children are not directly interviewed in the survey, but their parents and guardians are asked questions about activity limitations, school attendance, and any health conditions or impairments that might cause limitations.

Prevalence of Disability Among Children

Table 1 shows estimates of disability rates for children in three age groups. Comparisons among age groups are difficult because the NHIS definition of the expected "major activity" of a child changes from play for those under age 5 to school attendance for those aged 5 to 17. Only a small fraction (0.6 to 0.7 percent) of children of any age are reported as being unable to perform their major activity. And while only 1.4 percent of children under 5 are classified as being limited in the amount or kind of play activities they can engage in, older children are reported as far more likely to be limited in school attendance (5.0 percent, including those who attend or need to attend special schools or classes).

Only 0.7 percent of young children (under 5) are reported as limited in activities other than play, but not in play. A larger fraction of older children (2.0 percent) are limited in activities other than school attendance, but not school itself; many of these children may not be able to engage in certain types of play.

School-Related Disability

Overall, 5.5 percent of children and adolescents aged 5–17 have disabilities related to schooling—whether an inability to attend school at all, a need for special education, or a limitation in the amount of school attendance. Table 2 summarizes the prevalence of various levels of school-related disability among school-aged children. A relatively small proportion (0.6 percent) are unable to attend school at all. A much larger

Of the United States population under 18 years of age, 6.1 percent have disabilities.

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Table 1: Number (in thousands) and percent of children under age 18 with disabilities, by degree of limitation and age, 1992.

	Under 5		Ages 5—13		Ages 14—17	
	Number (1000's)	Percent	Number (1000's)	Percent	Number (1000's)	Percent
Total	19,657	100.0	33,378	100.0	13,450	100.0
With disability (limited in activity)	547	2.8	2,479	7.4	1,021	7.6
No disability (not limited in activity)	19,110	97.2	30,899	92.6	12,429	92.4
Definition of "major activity"	Play activities		Attending school		Attending school	
Degree of activity limitation:						
Unable to perform major activity	123	0.6	185	0.6	88	0.7
Limited in amount or kind of major activity	280	1.4	1,674	5.0	607	4.5
Limited, but not in major activity	145	0.7	620	1.9	326	2.4

Source: 1992 NHIS data from Disability Statistics Report #6: Mitchell P. LaPlante and Dawn Carlson, *Disability in the United States, Prevalence and Causes, 1992*. U.S. Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, 1995.

group is the 3.2 percent who attend special schools or classes, because of a health condition or impairment; an additional 0.5 percent are reported to need special education but not receive it. Finally, 1.2 percent are limited in school attendance, but are not reported to attend or need special classes.

Thus, of those children with school-related disabilities, 58.1 percent attend special schools or classes. An additional 9.6 percent are considered by their parents or guardians to need special schools or classes, but do not attend them. Of the 1.7 million school-age children classified as requiring special education, 85.8 percent actually receive it.

The main gender difference in school-related disability involves special education: boys are significantly more likely than girls to attend special schools or classes (3.9 versus 2.4 percent). Overall, 6.3 percent of boys and 4.5 percent of girls have school-related disabilities.

Table 3 shows rates for special education needs for various racial/ethnic groups. While non-Hispanic black and white children have about the same rates of attending special schools or classes (3.6 and 3.4 percent, respectively), Hispanic children show a significantly lower rate (2.2 percent). However, there is no statistically significant difference observed in the rate of needing but not receiving special education.

Special education rates for children living above and below the poverty line are also shown in Table 3. Children from poor families attend special schools and classes at nearly twice the rate of those who are not poor (5.2 versus 2.8 percent, respectively). The rate of needing but not receiving special education also differs by a similar factor (1.0 versus 0.4 percent).

The most common disabling condition is asthma, which affects 987,000 children.

Causes of Disability Among Children

In addition to establishing the presence and degree of disability, the NHIS attempts to identify the chronic diseases, disorders, and impairments that are associated with disabilities. An estimated 5.0 million conditions cause disabilities in 4.0 million children, an average of 1.2 conditions per child. Table 4 summarizes the prevalence of various broad categories of disabling conditions among children under 18 years of age. Diseases and disorders account for 58.4 percent of disabling conditions, while impairments account for the remaining 41.6 percent.

Diseases of the respiratory system constitute the most common group of disabling conditions (1.174 million conditions), most of which is asthma, which affects 987,000 thousand children. Mental retardation is second, with 786,000 t conditions. Mental disorders are third (440,000), with two-thirds of this category accounted for by

Table 2: Number (in thousands) and percent of children aged 5–17 with school-related disabilities, by degree of limitation and gender, 1992.

	Total		Males		Females	
	Number (1000's)	Percent	Number (1000's)	Percent	Number (1000's)	Percent
Total	46,828	100.0	23,968	100.0	22,860	100.0
Has school-related disability	2,554	5.5	1,520	6.3	1,034	4.5
Has disability, but not school-related	946	2.0	561	2.3	385	1.7
No disability	43,328	92.5	21,888	91.3	21,440	93.8
Degree of school-related disability:						
Unable to attend school	273	0.6	154	0.6	119	0.5
Attends special school or classes	1,484	3.2	924	3.9	560	2.4
Needs special school/classes but does not attend them	245	0.5	155	0.6	90	0.4
Otherwise limited in school attendance	552	1.2	287	1.2	265	1.2

Source: 1992 NHIS data from Disability Statistics Report #6: Mitchell P. La Plante and Dawn Carlson, *Disability in the United States, Prevalence and Causes, 1992.* U.S. Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, 1995.

Table 3: Number (in thousands) and percent of chldren aged 5–17 needing and receiving special education, by race, ethnicity, and poverty status, 1992.

	Total		Receives special education		Needs but doesn't receive special ed.	
	Number (1000's)	Percent	Number (1000's)	Percent	Number (1000's)	Percent
All children aged 5–17	46,828	100.0	1,484	3.2	245	0.5
White (non-Hispanic)	31,041	100.0	1,054	3.4	155	0.5
Black (non-Hispanic)	7,160	100.0	257	3.6	51	0.7
Hispanic (any race)	4,529	100.0	100	2.2	16 *	0.4
Above poverty line	34,907	100.0	969	2.8	152	0.4
Below poverty line	8,047	100.0	416	5.2	77	1.0

* Estimate has low statistical reliability—standard error exceeds 30 percent of estimate.

Source: 1992 NHIS data from Disability Statistics Report #6: Mitchell P. La Plante and Dawn Carlson, *Disability in the United States, Prevalence and Causes, 1992.* U.S. Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, 1995.

hyperkinetic syndrome of childhood (266,000). Diseases of the nervous system and sense organs rank fourth (375,000), the most prevalent component of which is epilepsy (123,000). Fifth most common are speech impairments, with 335,000 conditions.

Notes

This abstract is based on data contained in Disability Statistics Report #6: Mitchell P. LaPlante and Dawn Carlson, *Disability in the United States, Prevalence and Causes, 1992.* U.S. Department of Education, National Institute on Disagbility and Rehabilitation Research. 1995.

Credits

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Table 4: Health conditions and impairments causing disability in children under 18, by broad condition category, 1992

	Prevalence (in 1000's)	Percent
All Conditions	**4,974**	**100.0**
Part I: Impairments	**2,069**	**41.6**
Visual impairments	83	1.7
Hearing impairments	190	3.8
Speech impairments	335	6.7
Learning disabilities	167	3.4
Mental retardation/Down's syndrome	786	15.8
Absence or loss	18	0.4
Paralysis	140	2.8
(Cerebral palsy)	99	2.0
Deformities	134	2.7
(Spina bifida)	17	0.3
Orthopedic impairments	144	2.9
Other and ill-defined impairments	69	1.4
Part 2: All Diseases/Disorders	**2,906**	**58.4**
Infectious and parasitic diseases	47	0.9
Neoplasms	38	0.8
Endocrine, nutritional and metabolic diseases and immunity disorders	72	1.4
Diseases of the blood and blood-forming organs	32	0.6
Mental disorders (excluding mental retardation)	440	8.8
Psychoses	25	0.5
Neurotic, personality, & other nonpsychotic mental disorders	415	8.3
Diseases of the nervous system and sense organs:	375	7.5
Diseases of the nervous system	214	4.3
(Epilepsy)	123	2.5
Diseases of the eye	72	1.4
Disorders of the ear	89	1.8
Diseases of the circulatory system	63	1.3
Diseases of the respiratory system	1,174	23.6
(Asthma)	987	19.8
Diseases of the digestive system	70	1.4
Diseases of the genitoruinary system	33	0.7
Disease of musculoskeletal system & connective tissue	48	1.0
Diseases of the skin and subcutaneous tissue	61	1.2
Congenital anomalies	108	2.2
Symptoms, signs, and ill-defined conditions	279	5.6
Injury and poisoning	66	1.3

Source: 1992 NHIS data from Disability Statistics Report #6: Mitchell P. La Plante and Dawn Carlson, *Disability in the United States, Prevalence and Causes, 1992*. U.S. Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, 1995.

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